The Creative Underclass

Denmead, Tyler

Published by Duke University Press

Denmead, Tyler.
The Creative Underclass: Youth, Race, and the Gentrifying City.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/72251

For content related to this chapter
https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=book&id=2474175
Conclusion

A few years after New Urban Arts was founded in 1997, I was invited to give the keynote address at the National Young Leaders Conference in Washington, DC, an event hosted by the Congressional Youth Leadership Council. The conference is designed to spark civic engagement among students about to graduate from high school. The conference auditorium for that speech was filled with young people who had similar socioeconomic backgrounds to mine. During that speech, I told the aspiring youth civic leaders in the room that our entrepreneurial leadership in the nonprofit sector was going to level the playing field in our lifetimes. It is the only speech that I have ever given that resulted in a standing ovation. My message resonated with these young people at that particular moment. Like me, they were discovering a trajectory in life that allowed them to reassert their privileged social status while at the same time committing to the common good through the emerging practice of social entrepreneurship. I think it was unclear to most of us in the room that day how and why we were being summoned to live our lives in that particular way. Or, as I have argued through this book, we were invested in not knowing.

The discourse of social entrepreneurship was taking off at places such as Brown University in the 1990s. Indeed, Brown had established itself as a national leader in institutionalizing entrepreneurial students engaged in public service. In 1986, the president of Brown, Howard Swearer, established one of the first endowed public service centers at universities in the country, placing Brown at the forefront of what the Swearer Center has called a
“revolution” in higher education.¹ The Swearer Center, much like other university public service centers, provides a variety of public service opportunities locally, nationally, and abroad. As a first-year student in college in 1994, I began to venture into the city’s public schools through Swearer Center mentoring programs. As an upper-level student, I then took on paid leadership opportunities to facilitate the volunteering of my peers in similar programs, before winning a fellowship from the center to start New Urban Arts. This model of institutionalized public service opportunities has been replicated nationally.

At their best, public service centers such as the Swearer Center play a productive role in forging solidarities of praxis between college students and their community partners, putting both in a position to produce ideas together that contribute to more informed activism. Peter Hocking, the director of the Swearer Center when I was a student at Brown, and a key figure in advising me as I started New Urban Arts, was a strong advocate for this orientation. I have tried to write this book in that tradition. At their worst, however, these institutions invest in the cultural and economic status of race-class privileged young people as they extract time, labor, and ideas from marginalized communities. In my experience, these public service institutions can be complex places where both processes are playing out simultaneously.

As I participated in the Swearer Center in the 1990s, the emerging trend in public service was social entrepreneurship. Aspiring and privileged civic leaders, trained in the methods of public service, were launching and directing private nonprofit organizations and site-managed charter schools. It became the fashionable thing to do, unlike, for example, working in local, state, or national government or taking to the streets to protest injustices reproduced by social institutions. We were being recruited to look for a third way.

For those of us at Brown interested in education in the 1990s, our entrepreneurial efforts were undoubtedly influenced by Ted Sizer, a professor of education at Brown.² At the time, Sizer was pushing forward an ambitious national high school reform agenda influenced by the progressive educational ideas of John Dewey. His “Coalition of Essential Schools” was committed to transforming comprehensive and vocationally oriented public high schools into small, intellectually rigorous learning communities.³ I met Professor Sizer during his office hours in 1997 after reading one of his books to discuss my ideas for New Urban Arts. My idea for this youth-led and studio-based learning community was surely influenced by this locally significant conversation about small site-managed schools and the power of democratic learning spaces.
What was invisible to me then, or what I was invested in not seeing, was how this vision for social and educational entrepreneurship safely fit within the political viewpoint that the state is ineffective in providing equitable opportunities through, for example, district-managed public schools or even the redistribution of opportunity through public welfare. Market-based reforms have become rampant in all aspects of social life, including education, and it needed social entrepreneurs to play the part. In other words, the very possibility that I could make it as a social entrepreneur, that I imagined myself as such, fit comfortably within a discourse that has diminished support for the poor and has allowed racial injustice to fester and persist. The discourse of social entrepreneurship advanced through the efforts of elite universities, enhancing the status and profitability of its young civic leaders even as their wider political and economic commitments were being undermined. I am but one example of this broader social pattern.

After reading an early draft of this book, one reader asked me whether I still believed in New Urban Arts and the power of its programs. Had I changed my mind about the youth arts and humanities program that I started two decades ago as a social entrepreneur? As I conclude this book, I should state unequivocally that I believe in New Urban Arts more than ever. Yes, I am wrestling with a profound sense of ambivalence toward my own leadership. But I simply do not understand how poor youth, queer youth, and/or youth of color are expected to live their best lives in Providence, let alone survive, without this space of sanctuary and study, this space of joy and delight, amid conditions in Providence that have only worsened in many ways for them since the 1990s. I cherish the fact that young people have seized the opportunity of New Urban Arts to trouble violent and shameful representations of them as members of the underclass, precisely because those representations have provided the ideological backbone for a full-scale attack on minoritized and marginalized people living in cities during the past two decades. One front in that attack has been reconfiguring cities through the image of white creativity. I believe that the symbolic cultural practices theorized and enacted by young people in the storefront studio—troublemaking, the hot mess, chillaxing—have been so important to sustaining their lives and their political imaginaries during these bleak and troubling times. These times are bleak and troubling not only because of the ongoing violence and oppression of racial injustice, but the surrealist absurdity that we are still here, that this pattern remains so entrenched.

But it is also true that my interpretive stance has changed significantly since I left New Urban Arts in 2007, and even since I started this project in
2012. I no longer possess a liberal commitment to creativity as a pathway for mobility. The reality is far more complex, and the solutions require more than a creative education, or market-based, race-inflected conceptions of creativity. The solution requires political action supported by the cultural innovations of young people. This new interpretive stance has been shaped by my late arrival to understanding the dynamics of state-orchestrated, racialized class warfare in the name of creativity. Moreover, this new interpretive stance has been shaped by the political terrain and events that have been consuming the nation since I started this project in 2012. A major event for me was the police shooting of Michael Brown, an African American teenager in Ferguson, a suburb of St. Louis, Missouri, in 2014, which was one of too many extrajudicial killings of black people that gave rise to the Black Lives Matter movement and the renewed appreciation for the role of street protest in stopping it. Moreover, austerity politics following the global recession has shown nothing but contempt for the poor, concluding that everyone but the wealthiest top tenth of 1 percent will have to do with less. I have not been exempted from those politics, as I have worked at public universities since I left Brown University as a postdoctoral fellow in 2013, one in the United States, and the other in the United Kingdom. As I neared completion of this book in 2018, I was an active participant in the largest industrial action in the UK higher education sector in its history. The #MeToo movement has also put the spotlight on men in positions of power who have perpetrated physical and symbolic violence on women across various institutions, bringing about confessions and letters of apology that can easily be construed as self-serving. Urban gentrification has also become a hot-button issue, more loudly echoed by young people who participated in this research project as it unfolded. The data I collected pointed me to the ambivalence of some youth toward New Urban Arts in light of that gentrification. This maelstrom has challenged me to reconsider and to recalculate my own political and pedagogic commitments based on these lived experiences, as well as the ethnographic and autoethnographic evidence.

This new interpretive stance has forced me to engage critically with the underbelly of the Creative Capital. That critical engagement included coming to terms with my own willful blindness toward the “incorporation,” as Stuart Hall might put it, of marginalized youth and their youth development programs into the logic of creative urban renewal. That is to say, their potential threat to power has been refracted into a system of relations shaped by creativity, designed to shore up the power and privilege of white people. I recognize the compromises I made through New Urban Arts, which produced contradictory effects for young people in the city while enhancing my own
profitability as a white creative. Of course, that story repeats a familiar pattern of white people trying to help marginalized groups only to reassert their position. I have only illuminated this pattern within the context of the creative city. Moreover, I am at risk of reproducing this same dynamic through writing this book. I am susceptible to the criticism that this book is an effort to make up for past mistakes, putting on display my new understanding of how my participation as a white creative in Providence was structured through racial dominance, thus “gaslighting” my way to academic promotion without ceding any power or resources.

However, I hope that I have put forward a resonant and critical analysis of youth politics in the creative city, one that demands a critique of my own subject position, which is useful to the struggle for justice. Understanding how to engage in that struggle requires honoring the ambivalence of some youth toward my leadership and toward New Urban Arts. Ambivalence, it seems to me, is the right response to this conjuncture of the Creative Capital. After all, young people who have participated in New Urban Arts have experienced the pleasure and possibility of the storefront studio and have participated in transforming the city’s creative underground scene. At the same time, they have experienced deteriorating economic conditions and disappearing ways of life as white people have felt entitled to move into their neighborhoods and do cool things. The intellectual challenge of this book has been seeing these contradictory truths at the same time, recognizing that the irreconcilability of these outcomes can be explained through the very conditions of the Creative Capital itself. The vision for the city proclaimed its commitment to transforming “troubled youth” into “creative youth” while capitalizing on the cultural labor of privileged young people, often white people such as myself, who came to the city to attend elite higher education institutions. Those two demands cannot be reconciled. I did not anticipate this complexity and these contradictions when I started New Urban Arts in 1997 or this research project in 2012. With the benefit of hindsight, it is easy to see how I was a more than complacent in this pattern of urban renewal. I was invested in it.

So, the reality is that my social entrepreneurship through New Urban Arts was never designed to level the playing field for poor young people of color who wanted to develop their creative practices. After all, if I wanted to accomplish that outcome, I would have fought for expanding arts and humanities education in schools, where the struggle for education equity is most important and the cuts have been most severe, as much as I did for such education outside schools. Moreover, I would have fought for material conditions that allow their creative practices to thrive throughout their lifetimes. Upon
critical reflection of the evidence, it is easy to see how those conditions have worsened in many ways for young creatives in Providence since I started New Urban Arts in the late 1990s. The reality is that the turn to creative youth development, to the teaching of creative skills, has come at the precise moment when there are few jobs for those skills to be put to work.

**POSTSECONDARY OPTIONS FOR THE CREATIVE UNDERCLASS**

One option for young creatives from New Urban Arts is to go to college. Yet college-bound youth from low-income and working-class communities will be doing so at the precise moment that US society is heaping unprecedented costs on young people that will only delay the possibility of economic independence, if not erase its possibility through lifelong indebtedness. Moreover, they can work for and receive this college degree when the promise of higher education as a means of socioeconomic mobility is in tatters. To compete among the next generation of creative thinkers, young people from New Urban Arts will need to earn advanced, postgraduate degrees. Indeed, this new labor requirement has become the new means of social stratification because postgraduate credentials are far more likely to be awarded to students from more affluent backgrounds, and, as youth studies scholar James Côté has indicated, the more affluent acquire more career advantages and higher incomes from postgraduate degrees.\(^7\) Worse still, some young people at New Urban Arts are being forced to navigate higher education without knowing their citizenship status because politicians have used undocumented youth as a political pawn, thus failing to act on offering protections and pathways for “Dreamers” as I complete this book in 2018. But higher education still remains the best option, even if that option is not what it once was.

A second option is for these young people to try to make it as creative entrepreneurs while they go to high school and/or college, or bypass one or both. Indeed, that is precisely what Monty Oum decided to do when he dropped out of high school and participated in New Urban Arts to refine his skills as a digital animator. Yet creative entrepreneurs such as Monty Oum will have to take this social and financial risk at a particular moment in Providence’s history when the public safety net has been eviscerated and housing is among the most unaffordable in the nation. As I noted, the total expenditures for cash assistance to poor families from the state government of Rhode Island decreased from $51.5 million the year I founded New Urban Arts in 1997 to zero dollars in 2017.\(^8\) The state government passed a minimum wage local preemption law in 2014 that blocked local municipalities from raising their minimum wages, which, for Providence stood at $9.60 as of 2016.\(^9\) Providence now has the
fourth-worst housing affordability gap for Latinx communities in the country, behind San Jose, California; Boston, Massachusetts; and San Francisco, California. This unaffordability, and this hollowing out of the welfare state, has only compounded the risks for young creative people who might try to launch their own enterprises. So the expectation that creative entrepreneurship is the pathway to economic independence for these young people ultimately reasserts the advantages of those who are poised to take advantage of their upbringings and social positions because they have inherited a private safety net.

A third option for these creative youth is to compete for low-wage service sector jobs in Providence while pursuing high school and/or college degrees, and perhaps launching a creative hustle on the side. After all, the conventional creative city script in Providence has been most successful at transforming the city into a youthful and creative symbolic economy, which, in turn, is correlated with an increase in low-wage jobs in the local retail, food, and hotel industries. Yet young people of color from working-class and low-income backgrounds now face fierce competition for these jobs. Historically, young people who have attended programs such as New Urban Arts have depended upon access to service sector jobs, such as working at McDonald’s. But given the changing demographics in Providence, and its dysfunctional labor market, these young people are now more likely to find themselves competing for low-wage jobs in upmarket cafes and grocery stores with, for example, graduates from Brown or RISD who stay in town and have the privilege of being able to choose to not get a “real job” and “stick it to the man.”

A fourth option for young creatives is to reassert their own sense of self-determination by rejecting the need to get a “real job” or go to college. These youth can find solace and self-respect, as well as recognition, in Providence’s creative underground scene, which celebrates the identities and radical politics of poor and queer youth of color. But, as I have shown, this choice reproduces their subordinate class futures at the precise moment that Rhode Island has eviscerated welfare support and profited from their cultural labor.

A fifth option for these young creatives is to leave Providence for better opportunities elsewhere. That is what Monty Oum did when he went to Austin, Texas, to become one of the most celebrated digital storytellers in the history of the web. But this pathway, too, reasserts advantages to those who have inherited the resources to be mobile and withstand the risks of doing so. National labor and welfare policy have simply not adapted to the precarious conditions of the workplace and the new geography of jobs, which would require new commitments to policies such as universal basic income, single-payer health care, and mobility vouchers.
As I reflect on these bleak postsecondary options now, fifteen years after I gave that speech at the National Young Leaders Conference, I recognize that I did not level the playing field through my work at New Urban Arts even as New Urban Arts has played a vital role in young people’s lives. This honest assessment does not necessitate a turn to despair. Instead, I have reflected more deeply on what it means for me to forge solidarities and commit to political action that dismantles the conditions of creativity that have been designed to reassert (my) white profitability. My hope is that my concept of the creative underclass can play a performative role in this particular struggle for creative youth justice.

THE POLITICAL POSSIBILITIES OF THE CREATIVE UNDERCLASS

Throughout this book, I have used the term “the creative underclass” to refer to the political subjectivity of “troubled youth” who are transformed into “creative youth.” I have argued that this new kind of citizen-subject has been key to the argument that the Creative Capital is both inclusive and trendy. But none of the young people who participated in this study stated that they identified as members of a “creative underclass.” It is my term. At the same time, I have shown how their identity work as youth in the Creative Capital has been attached, if only temporarily, to the “creative” and the “underclass” aspects of the creative city script. As a result, I think the term is useful in representing the experiences and perspectives of these youth in the creative city, as much as it is also helpful in undermining the uncritical acceptance of creativity as a force for urban good.

There were several examples of how young people’s symbolic cultural practices at New Urban Arts engaged with “creativity” and the “underclass” as discursive material. For example, Gabriela theorized how young people at New Urban Arts construct their identities and fashion their bodies in ways that trouble their position as “troubled youth,” as members of an underclass. Lunisol explained why she thought embracing the lifestyle of a “creative” reproduced her socioeconomic position as an underemployed person who might die from frostbite because she chose to live in an abandoned factory without heat during the winter. Andre found pleasure and artistic possibility in conforming to and exceeding underclass representations of poor young people of color as culturally deprived individuals who lack self-restraint. Laura speculated on a conspiracy theory that the government wanted young people to become either broke and powerless artists, or famous and civically disengaged artists, in order to protect its political and economic interests. Luis told me that he did not think he was going to be “my guy” because he had not par-
participated in the city’s underground scene as a punk rocker or photographer. Theo described how they had infiltrated the creative underground scene and helped to transform it to affirm the identities of queer and poor youth of color in ways that differed from the “white hipster” scene of Boston. Each of these observations by young people who participated in this research show how they are negotiating these identities of “creative” and “underclass” youth in the Creative Capital.

These examples show how this term, “the creative underclass,” can also be useful politically. The “under” in “the creative underclass” calls into question the commonsense attitude toward urban youth and creativity—that becoming creative is key to their future mobility. Rhetorically, “the creative underclass” compels us to ask, “How can someone become a member of the underclass—or reproduce their position as a member of the underclass—if they become creative?” The term itself defies the logic that is so key to justifying creative city politics. It breaks positive emotional attachments to a term that is so useful in building antagonistic political coalitions in the interests of whiteness. The conventional creative city script depends upon the assumption that becoming creative is the key to prosperity for all youth in the creative city. Without it, this script is simply revealed as a state-sponsored strategy to gentrify the city, to double down on the already guaranteed futures of white people.

Attaching the “under” to Richard Florida’s concept of the creative class is also meant as a playful semantic inversion. After all, my rhetorical use of “the underclass” could be read as derogatory because that term has been used to explain poverty through cultural deprivation. “The creative class” signifies superior white creatives and my use of “the creative underclass” could then signify inferior creatives of color. But I am inverting this pejorative usage to speculate on what political possibilities might be opened up if the creative underclass is positioned as a site of political strength and opportunity in undermining the white creativity norm, not reinscribing creative inferiority and cultural deprivation on young people of color from low-income and working-class backgrounds.

This rhetorical move came to me after witnessing the 2014 art exhibition *Ruffneck Constructivists* at the Institute of Contemporary Art in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, while I was working on this book project. This art exhibition was curated by Kara Walker, who, incidentally, received her graduate degree in fine art from RISD in 1994. The show featured sculpture, paintings, installations, and videos that together interrogated the productive power of black masculinity in reshaping the symbolic potential of space. In explaining her curatorial vision for the show, Walker included wall text that stated,
I was wondering what Black Architecture would look like if there were enough Black architects to bring forth a spatial movement that contained all the angst and braggadocio and ego and rage that Black creatives have brought forth in other fields, particularly music, but also underground entrepreneurship, dance, “thug life,” and spiritualism. Given the negative forces (economic, segregationist) that have shaped space around Black Bodies, what questions, concerns, or psychoses might inform or limit the Black Architect; and also, in what ways do folks become architects by their refusal to accept the limits of social space—who undermine (or mine under) the norm? To that end, *Ruffneck Constructivists* was conceived, a nexus between bebop, hip hop, modern architecture, state control and violently passionate self-determination.13

After witnessing and reflecting upon this profound art exhibition in 2014, only two years after I completed my first round of fieldwork at New Urban Arts, I pondered the power of the “under” in “the creative underclass.” Given the negative forces that have shaped space around poor young people of color in Providence through the discourse of white creativity, how might a creative underclass “undermine (or mine under)” the white creativity norm?

In this book, I have provided several examples of how young people at New Urban Arts have done just that. I turned to Gabriela, whose theory and practice of troublemaking shows how youth at New Urban Arts are fucking up white notions of what it means to be black or brown children through, for example, the politics of style and self-fashioning. I turned to the hot mess at New Urban Arts, which provides young people momentary reprieve from toxic and traumatic racist encounters. In the hot mess, they produce a fun and pleasurable environment with a healthy degree of randomness and spontaneity that allow them to experiment with their creative practices and identities. I turned to Lewis and Lunisol, who theorized how chillaxing refuses the suggestion that young people of color from low-income backgrounds need to become more productive as creatives to get ahead at the precise moment that fewer opportunities and supports are available to them. I affirmed the rarely recognized intellectuality and emotional depth of young people in the studio as they sit and talk, as they share love and affection for one another during both exciting and difficult times. And I turned to Thomas, Laura, and Luis, who theorized how young people of color from New Urban Arts are “infiltrating” a creative underground scene so that it recognizes and affirms their non-normative black/brown creative identities.

In this book, I have pointed out how each of these cultural practices
is contradictory and limited. But this ethnographic account has shown that young people are creating the pedagogic conditions that allow them to experiment with and transform their identities in ways that destabilize white creativity as supreme. As such, there is rich potential in working with these symbolic practices to complement political activism that resists gentrifying cities.

MAKING A HOT MESS OF GENTRIFYING CITIES

In 2011, Joey La Neve DeFrancesco, a disgruntled employee of the Renaissance Providence Hotel, handed his boss his resignation letter as his bandmates in the What Cheer? Brigade, a punk brass marching band, blared their horns and banged their drums. Together, they walked out of the bowels of the hotel, leaving DeFrancesco’s boss dumbfounded and angry, as he held his arms in the air. This triumphant moment was captured on video and uploaded to YouTube; it has now been viewed over six million times. This labor protest took place at a hotel that is another symbol of Providence’s uneven renewal. It was opened in 2007 in a monumental Greek Revival building that was begun by the Freemasons before the Great Depression but was not completed as a result of that financial collapse. The building remained only a shell until it was completed and transformed into a hotel as Providence became the Creative Capital. DeFrancesco resigned after a long struggle with management of the hotel during a unionization campaign before becoming a member of the punk band Downtown Boys.

Staff members, artist-mentors, and former youth participants from New Urban Arts have all performed in the What Cheer? marching band over the years, and the band has shown strong solidarity with young people of New Urban Arts by performing during art openings in the studio and leading street parades for youth participants during the end-of-the-year Art Party. DeFrancesco’s protest, and the band’s strong support for New Urban Arts, challenged me to consider creative cultural strategies of resistance toward gentrification in Providence. In particular, I see parallels between DeFrancesco’s protest and the hot mess of New Urban Arts. They are loud, fun, irreverent, pleasurable, and disrespectful. DeFrancesco’s protest does not conform to respectable forms of labor protest in the same way that young people’s participation in New Urban Arts does not conform to respectable forms of education. DeFrancesco disregards the notion that if he were to act more respectable as a worker then he could advance his career in the same way that young people from New Urban Arts are rejecting the notion that if they become more respectable as “troubled youth” they will experience mobility as creatives. Their tactics meet the absurd conditions that they have inherited with the same ab-
surdity. These tactics are so antagonistic because they are indifferent to power and they are invested in the pleasure and the possibilities of the protestors.

This analysis challenges typical views of what youth resistance is expected to look like. There is a tendency to appreciate youth resistance when young people are engaged in a rational and deliberate critique of their circumstances. There is a tendency to demand a clear demarcation between youth resistance and youth mischief. In other words, youth political resistance is often assumed to be right and proper when it is solemn and stoic, planned and purposeful, perhaps even respectful of power. But when Gabriela and DeFrancesco engage in their respective troublemaking, they are instead focused on the loudness of a “huge fucking Afro” and the big horns of blaring bandmates. The improvisational hot mess of New Urban Arts and DeFrancesco’s protest are spontaneous and unexpected. Together, people smile and laugh, transforming the moment of protest, the moment of creative pedagogy, into collective aesthetic joy that gathers force by showing little concern for the ideas and feelings of those in positions of power. Given the bleak conditions that young people have inherited, it does not seem that power has warranted such respect. So, it seems to me that the creative underclass can draw upon this strategy of troublemaking to produce a hot mess in the Creative Capital, demonstrating their indifference to cultural sites and individuals in the city who signify white gentrification, while experiencing the excessiveness of being loud and being spontaneous. Along with their protest, they can put forward their demands for a city that honors the creativity of black and brown youth.

This proposal resonates with some of the most effective and recent youth activist strategies against white gentrification in American cities. Consider, for example, Defend Boyle Heights in Los Angeles, an activist group that has pioneered tactics over the past couple of years that have influenced other protest movements in other gentrifying cities, including Chicago and Austin. These young people of color have targeted public art events, art galleries, craft breweries, and single-origin coffee shops that have opened up in their neighborhoods, the kind of places that Luis singled out when he discussed gentrification in Providence.

In one example of Defend Boyle Heights’ protests, high school students harassed the performance of a public art event by playing their trumpets and saxophones. Youth activists have also showed up at gallery openings chanting, “Hey! Hey! Ho! Ho! These gentrifiers have got to go!” They have screen-printed and sold T-shirts that read “Fuck Hipsters.” And when a real estate developer rebranded a building “Mariachi Crossing,” attempting to produce
yet another spectacle of ethnicity in their neighborhood for more affluent real estate buyers, they led a successful nine-month rent strike against the developer.  

Defend Boyle Heights also waged a protest against a coffee shop, Weird Wave Coffee. More than a dozen protestors confronted customers entering and exiting the shop, demanding a boycott and shouting, “Fuck White Coffee” and referring to the shop as “White Wave” coffee. The protestors handed out flyers that told customers that breaking the boycott was “an act of aggression and alignment with the racial destruction of Boyle Heights as a Latinx, working-class community.” One of the owners of the coffee shop, an entrepreneur who came to the United States as a political refugee from El Salvador, referred to the protests as “straight-up racism, reverse racism against me and my friends.”

This group has also resorted to more controversial and violent tactics, including smashing the storefront window of a craft brewery taproom. Their argument is that vandalizing property and making threats of violence are necessary because gentrification itself is a violent act of aggression, a not-so-subtle way of destructing shared ways of life. Of course, I would not advocate for making violent threats or destroying property. But I am calling attention to protest that can and should embrace tactics that produce ambivalence for some and anger for others, otherwise they would be neither disruptive nor effective. This mode of resistance must be loud and fun for the protestors and disruptive for consumers by making visible the “collateral” of gentrification. Of course, the mere presence of young people of color being creative with their bodies and their protests makes visible that collateral.

While youth participants at New Urban Arts might not have intended for their hot mess to be a crash course in how to protest, they can bring their hot mess into the streets of the Creative Capital in effective ways. They can try to have fun and be weird while they fuck up the notion that Providence is a cool place for white people, and upwardly mobile people, to do cool things. Gentrifiers need to be reminded of the costs of their symbolic actions. Young people can put on their T-shirts that say “Be the trouble you want to see in the world” or maybe even “Creative Underclass.” They can grab their fifes and drums. They can embody Christopher Walken and craft hell-raiser hairstyles. They can put on their gangster bows and poop rainbows like unicorns. And they can get turnt as they drown out the enjoyment of gentrifiers who are hanging out in the city’s new hip taprooms and galleries. Such protest—which is creative and pleasurable because it exceeds representations of them as members of an underclass who lack self-restraint—can reaffirm their identi-
ties and reassert the symbolic meaning of spaces for them. Policy changes in their favor will not come without this protest.

Antigentrification youth activists in the Creative Capital can also flip the conventional creative city script by running their own place-based marketing campaign. They can leverage new forms of media coverage to tap into the rising discontent over gentrification. In particular, they can run a media campaign that is oriented toward encouraging tourists to withhold their export income from cities until they alter local policy environment in support of communities that are being gentrified. For example, Fodor’s, the world’s largest publisher of English travel and tourist information, now creates a “No List” each year. Fodor’s recommends destinations that people should not visit in order to preserve the splendor and possibility of life there. In 2017, the state of Missouri made Fodor’s “No List.” Several reasons were cited, including a state law that made it more difficult to sue employers for sexual discrimination, hate crimes committed against Muslims, and the extrajudicial killing of black people by law enforcement. This struggle to re-present tourist destinations as troubled destinations is useful in the context of Providence because, more often than not, tourists and visitors to the city want to see themselves as modern and politically progressive. So advocates for youth in the city can pool together their resources and hire their own place-based marketing agencies that draw attention to the grim realities for communities of color that are being displaced. Perhaps North Star Destination Strategies, which drafted Providence’s rebranding strategy and claims to save “the world one community reputation at a time,” can be pressured to help frame this campaign and provide these services pro bono.

Through calling attention to the ways in which the creative city has only made life more unequal for poor youth of color in Providence, this threat to property owners and businesses will provide leverage in altering local policy that serves young people’s interests—a living wage, affordable housing, rent control, public transportation, greater public support for youth arts and humanities programs, creative learning in schools, and so forth. Of course, the city and the state will claim that they have no money for this agenda and that it will deter capital investment. So this place-based counternarrative campaign will have to highlight the ways in which the city has provided welfare for affluent white people during the past two decades through the conventional creative city script in ways that simply have not trickled down to low-income communities of color. This pattern has repeated itself for centuries in Providence. Enough is enough.

Another possible cultural protest strategy against the Creative Capital
could build upon the theory and practice of chillaxing at New Urban Arts. Chillaxing can be interpreted as a form of resistance because young people are, in effect, refusing the demand to be productive, to get ahead, to become more creative based on the false promise that creativity is key to their futures. Young people in Providence who participate in the city’s numerous nationally recognized youth programs could go on a collective youth development strike through chillaxing in their respective programs. In other words, they could attend these programs but collectively refuse to participate in them until the city adopts certain policies and practices that make it worth it for them to “be developed.”

This mode of resistance is an important consideration because I have come to the conclusion that youth arts and humanities programs have paradoxically provided political cover for worsening conditions for youth in Providence. Those who aspire to power can point to these programs as evidence that youth are being well served in Providence, even as the state takes steps to eviscerate support for those same youth. Moreover, these programs contribute to the narrative that if young people want to transition from the dependence of childhood to the independence of adulthood, then they need to invest in their own futures by participating in these programs, and in turn, become more creative. When this promised pathway does not pan out, then the very presence of these programs can be used to support the claim that the city provided youth with equal opportunity. So, if and when shit gets hard or they happen to fuck up, they are the ones to be blamed for being left behind as members of an underclass.

But youth development is not going to solve the problem of a suppressed minimum wage that affects people of color and women most in Providence. Youth development is not going to solve the redistribution of wealth through tax subsidies for property development. Youth development is not going to solve the problem of newspaper outlets choosing another ethnic enclave as the latest trendy neighborhood to gentrify. Youth development is not going to solve the problem of property developers rebranding buildings in their ethnic and/or creative image and then raising their rents until youth can no longer live there. So youth and their allies are going to have to make public their refusal to be developed, to call attention to the fact that youth development simply has not leveled the playing field. Through chillaxing, they can engage in the incessant and irreversible intellectuality of hanging out in the Zen Zone, doing nothing but talking and loving until particular policies in the city and the state are changed for their benefit. In the meantime, they can keep on surviving through chillaxing, because, as Lunisol put it, that is at least enough for
now. The counterreaction against a youth development strike will be fierce, using racist and classist representations of youth as lazy and shiftless, uppity and overly entitled. Allies will need to be poised and ready to provide solidarity to these young people as they engage in such acts of resistance. If it is useful, Rhode Island’s “Best Role Model” from 2003 will be ready to lend support! And the national field of youth development will watch, wondering how a city with such a stellar reputation for youth development has gotten to this point, which will only provide young people with leverage for their own cause.

White people, particularly those young people graduating from Brown and RISD who decide to remain in the city, will also have to continue to engage in the difficult task of forging solidarity with the creative underclass as they engage in their struggle for creative youth justice. To do so, these white creatives need to engage in their own troublemaking to fuck up what it means to be a white creative or social entrepreneur, undermining the ways in which whiteness invests in its own superiority and profitability through reshaping the symbolic meaning of urban space. Key to that strategy requires thinking through what it means to be an effective white artist-mentor to youth in the Creative Capital. White artists who want to do good in the creative city can ask how the subject position of the “artist-mentor” has been produced discursively through the logic of creative-led urban renewal. This orientation asks how and why white people from elite institutions are in demand to transform “troubled youth,” and who profits from that demand. That is precisely the kind of critical investigation that Lunisol suggested when she asked me why people adored me in the studio and why the privilege of artist-mentors was invisible to her as she formed meaningful relationships with these “real gems.” She wanted to know why I possessed special status as a white creative and why the conditions of white creativity were made invisible to her through arts mentoring. Deconstructing that status and those conditions with the creative underclass can be key to forging solidarity and to thinking through new political possibilities for racially and class privileged creatives.

The script for urban renewal through creativity is not final, and the fates of youth are not determined. But creative youth justice requires new forms of cultural and political resistance after more than two decades of piloting creative youth development strategies. Through drawing on the perspectives and experiences of young people at New Urban Arts, I have presented some strategies for the creative underclass to undermine the power and privilege of white creativity in their fight for justice:
CONCLUSION

- creative troublemaking as a means for young people of color to fuck up degrading and dehumanizing representations of youth that serve the possessive interests of whiteness,
- participating in an unpredictable and spontaneous hot mess that brings pleasure and possibility through conforming to and exceeding representations of them as members of the underclass,
- taking that hot mess into the streets at key sites throughout the city that signify gentrification,
- chillaxing to recuperate from the institutional toxicity that threatens the well-being of marginalized youth,
- transforming the creative underground to affirm their identities,
- place-based counternarratives that re-represent the creative city of Providence as a no-go destination until policies are put into place which serve the interests of local youth,
- a youth development general strike, and
- new solidarities between the creative underclass and the creative class.

Surely, this list is only a start. Critical forms of research have an ongoing role to play in identifying and supporting the development of new political strategies in Providence and beyond. Clearly, Providence is not alone in refashioning itself from a disinvested and deindustrialized landscape into a youthful and creative symbolic economy. Further research can examine how youth programs, as well as other arts and humanities programs in other cities, have responded critically and creatively to various scripts for urban renewal that come at the expense of creative youth who lived in cities before they became creative.

With these added perspectives, youth arts and humanities programs will be better poised to support youth as members of the creative underclass, refusing to do the work of being trained and developed, fixed and corrected into normative conceptions of adulthood and white creativity. Youth can be supported by organizations such as New Urban Arts as they oppose regimes of supremacy and the reassertion of whiteness that are invested in transfiguring the bodies and lifestyles of young people of color who choose creativity into sources of profit and spectacles of ethnicity for their land grabs. These regimes, playing out under the rubric of urban renewal, are always looking to sink their hooks into the new, the young, the trendy, the ethnic, the quirky, and the queer.

So now, more than ever, youth arts and humanities programs need to
do what youth at New Urban Arts are asking them to do: Let them go underground and do the work of surviving and pleasure seeking. Refuse these above-the-ground demands, which tax their lives and render their bodies expendable. Here, in the underground for the creative underclass, these programs can support youth as they seek refuge during these troubled times, knowing that young people and their allies can reemerge on their own terms, living their best lives, being their best selves. And when they do, they will be justified in making a hot mess of the Creative Capital, fucking up white notions of what it means to be black or brown, denying from whiteness the ownership of what was, is, and will be rightfully theirs—their homes, their bodies, their histories, their lands, their loves, their laughs, and their creative futures of perpetual flight.